

CHRISTMAS in CHICAGO



FANNY BUTCHER

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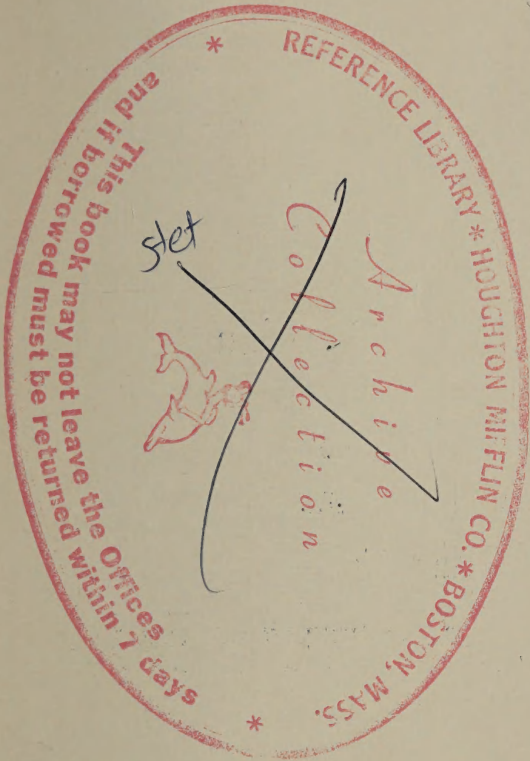
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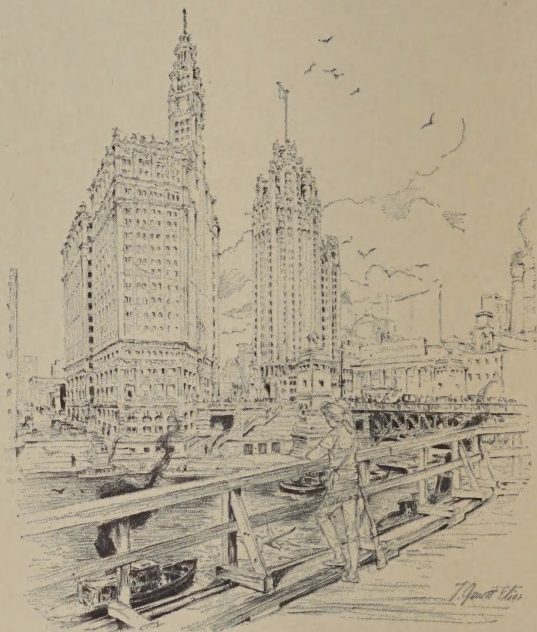


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CHRISTMAS IN CHICAGO

A FLARE of lights. A giant tree tapering up and up until it seems to melt into the sky, except that the glittering star which crowns it puts to shame the gentle glimmerings in the background of the blue-black heavens. Spangles, like a circus-rider's dress, flutter in the swish of air, blaze out in the footlight glare of the barrage of lights which are turned on the tree. The family Christmas tree giganticized to a tree for the family of the great city.

And underneath, thousands upon thou-

sands of human beings tramping about in the snow, listening to a band, watching the fluttering bangles of the spectacular tree. A river of motors slowly flowing past the picture — slowly, whether they will or no, for there is no hurrying in the mass that drives down to see the tree.

In the *mêlée* that worms about beneath the tree there are men and women from the four corners of the earth. There are faces moulded in such fantastically different casts that you cannot but wonder how mankind can be all one mankind. There are voices thick with the gutturals of Middle Europe, soft with the sunshine of the South, and heavy with the interminable consonants of the North.

There is a medley of sound, human voices of all the tones of the earth's surface doing that peculiarly unmusical feat of all talking at once, and being heightened rather than

subdued by the din of the band trying to be heard in a bellowing of that gentle lullaby 'Heilige Nacht.' And the overtone is always the honking of impatient motorists or gayly inclined ones who feel that the best way to express approval in modern life is to make as loud and raucous a noise as possible.

And all over the city, in its endless miles of boulevards and parks, little brothers of the great tree are glittering against the sky. And underneath those others, as underneath the great tree itself, mankind swishes and huddles and gazes and talks. Miles and miles apart they are, from the steel mills on the south painting the sky a flame red to the fastnesses of suburban sobriety and sedateness on the north, from the vast new bungalow-studded southwest to the factory-dotted northwest merging into two-flat buildings and inter-urbaned real estate plots.

The municipal tree of Chicago — whether it be the great tree on the lake front or the offspring which each local community rears as a pledge of its own Christmas joys — is a triumph of civic ideals. It is a symbol to the thousands, who are strangers — if not in fact, at least in that pitifully intense way in which mankind can be alone in the millions that make a great city — that the city is human. And it has been such a short time that the city has been human — that it has had time to be anything but a growing, hungry, physically developing giant of a child. Out of its rompers, Chicago is now, and present at the great moment of decorating the Christmas tree of the ‘children.’

There is something adolescent and very charming and very *naïve* about this Christmas Chicago. It has just reached the time when it feels that the world is taking some notice of it, when it feels its first thrills of

conquest, when it cleans out its pockets, throws away the broken knife blades and the slightly worn wads of gum and the marbles and substitutes the picture of the chorus girl and the pocket comb. It is washing behind its ears. And it can blush with gorgeous *naïveté* at the thought of making a social *faux-pas*. It is terribly self-conscious, and like all growing youth it still has its cosmic dreams.

Chicago's delight in its Christmas tree is at the same time the delight of the child in any glittering gaudily lighted scene, and the delight of the youth who remembers his baby days and his passionate belief in Santa Claus and sees in the great tree a monument to the few years that have intervened.

There is romance in that thought. Within the memory of many men and women who walk beneath the great tree, within the lifetime of one of the thousands of trees that

have been brought to the making of the great tree and its lesser relatives, the spot did not exist at all where now the gigantic realization of a dream of a Christmas tree stands. It was a wave on its way to lap a sandy shore, or caught in the fastnesses of ice. And the shore when it was reached was a spot where children picnicked in summer, where horses were brought to the water's edge for a drink, where wagons were washed, where the water itself was dipped up in buckets and carried into the little houses of the village. It was a spot where bemuffled children slid back and forth in winter, cautiously keeping inshore. The spot where the great tree stood the first time it was made, before the outlying communities had their separate celebrations, on the land just east of Madison Street and north of the Art Institute, was in the very early days a public burying-ground. Rude storms from the east fre-

quently gnawed at the earth until it had given up its hidden coffins, battered them into fragments, and left scattered, gruesome remains on the shore when the calm came. Within the lifetime of a man it has grown from burying-ground to the waterfront park of one of the great cities of the world.

On any Christmas Eve in those days — and some are still alive who remember it — the smooth motor-filled boulevard which magnificently borders the city was a country road, frozen in deep ruts, or, if the weather had been mild, a sandy morass, thick and impassable. And the streets just west of it, the streets which are filled with Christmas shoppers, with ballyhooers for jumping bunnies and sparklers and little rubber men who stick out their tongues and great tin lobsters which waddle around on the sidewalk, the streets which are thick with hu-

man beings and every known mechanical device to lure them and give them comfort and excitement — these same streets were frozen bogs of pathways barely worth the name of road, often with an abandoned cart mutely crying their impassability. Signs proclaiming ‘No bottom here’ told the tale which the rivers of mud only hinted at. The very street, where an elevated whangs by overhead, a street car clangs its warning to the holiday crowds, and ceaselessly honking motors make a bedlam of the air, is the scene of the classic story of the man who, in the early days, was up to his ears in mud. From a spot identical with one which is being stepped over by thousands, so the story goes, a pedestrian offered to throw out a lifeline to the mud-imprisoned neighbor. ‘Don’t worry about me,’ he is said to have answered, ‘I’m on a good horse.’ That story delighted our grandfathers.



The sidewalks, lined with gaudy windows wheedling dollars from the passers-by and noisy with street hawkers, passionately supply last-minute gew-gaws for the tired men and women who have had to shop late because they had no money to shop early — sidewalks smooth and wide and sturdy to the tramp of millions of feet — not over a lifetime ago were narrow strips of wood, raised on stilts, with enough room underneath for children to play and for rats to hold continuous convention. Within the memory of its oldest inhabitants those same planks which served as walks were the scene of many a fiasco when an arrogant Indian would calmly push a child off into mud which almost smothered it — an indignity which had to be borne by the members of the community who still remembered the horrors of the Fort Dearborn massacre. Those same lordly concrete ways were the

scene in the early days of many a romantic moment when carriages and carts were drawn up to the very doors of the houses and shops and whatever strong male arms that happened to be present were offered to lift the 'wimminfolks' safely from one dry spot to another. High hip boots, they all wore, those early Chicago cavaliers, and of necessity.

Is it not a legitimate glitter of pride in the twinkling eyes of the great tree when it looks upon the vast and teeming loop of the city and remembers that, not so long ago but that men now living can remember, the whole prairie south of the river was a great bog, dry at times, but always at the mercy of every rainfall, and of the seepage from the erratic river that flowed now into the lake and now from it? Ten feet lower than the land to the north of the river it was — this spectacular loop of Chicago, which

is unlike the same space of ground anywhere else in the world — and only the dreamers could see that it could ever be made into a city. Is the pride out of place when one remembers that the first civic accomplishment of the village was the gigantic one of raising the level of the south bank and its adjoining acres until it was no longer sick with soggianness? And may it not also be a matter of pride that that river, so gayly going its own unreasoning way, now north, now south, was tamed to the quiet dignity of flowing in one direction?

Would it not give any city a Christmasy feeling of triumph to realize that the land which looks out upon its harbor, land which to-day is weighed in ounces of gold, where great hotels and shops harbor the riches and fripperies of the world, was, within the memory of men and women still actively a part of the city's life, the pasture for the whole

town south of the river? It has been many a year since a cow wore down the grass by the roadside of Michigan Avenue, or munched its way about on the prairie, but no more than sixty years ago all of the residents of the South Side took their cows out in the morning and went for them at night. The community practically ended at Wabash and Adams Streets, and the favorite grazing lands were the spots where the Blackstone and Stevens Hotels now have their roots. Even as late as 1871, the year when the world was shocked by the news of the great Chicago fire, cows were still wandering about contentedly in the prairies.

Mayn't the city well wear a mammoth Christmas tree as an adornment this Christmas morning when it looks upon its vastness, when it remembers that, from a mere handful of settlers less than ninety years ago, it has become the home of over three mil-

lions? In hundreds of thousands of homes in the vast miles that make Chicago as large and populous as many a monarchy, there are small replicas of the great tree, jeweled with many colored electric bulbs sheltering gifts, each single one of which would have dowered a bride in the older days. A diamond bracelet, dangling to the delight of some eager daughter or wife, is a bauble which, in those days, would have bought the entire loop. A house and an adjacent block of ground could have been purchased with the money that has been spent for one of the many shiny new motor cars that stand in front of hundreds of shiny little brick houses for the first time this Christmas morning.

In the old days, a pair of shoes, woolen underwear, warm mittens, or a highly extravagant 'fascinator' knitted by skillful fingers were the gifts which elicited shrieks

of joy from the recipients. An orange was the height of luxury for a child; and he had one orange, not a basket full of them. One wealthy old settler tells with heart-breaking candor of his envy at the sight of a play-mate who owned and devoured one large orange before his yearning eyes, and how the memory lasted for years. The highly humanized modern doll, that does everything but think, now walks under the adoring eyes of its 'mama' and says 'Papa' and 'Mama' with equal tenderness to-day. In the early days a little girl was being pampered by her mother when she found among her useful Christmas gifts a creature made of rags and which had to have all of its talking and walking done for it.

Parties all over the city as big as a country are gay with boys and girls home from preparatory schools and colleges and fathers and mothers and grandfathers and

grandmothers, all apparently the same age, all living lives made easy by modernity. In the great hotels that face the tree, there are numberless Christmas celebrations, where the guests are all handsomely dinner-jacketed and gowned, all very sophisticated, all having eaten just a little too much and perhaps tiddled less wisely than well, dancing something that in the early days of Chicago would have shocked the city fathers. And there is much conversation about the small high-powered roadster that this one found in his Christmas stocking, and the jaunt to Palm Beach as soon as the Christmas gayeties are past, and the new bridge rules, and there is more rich food and bubbly drink. Cosmopolitan, typically modern American they all are, with yearly trips to Europe to furbish up a wardrobe or to buy knickknacks for the new house. There is as much wealth in the persons of the guests as in the

old days the whole territory west of the Hudson would have boasted.

In the memory of one of the grandmothers who is lending, for an hour or so, the dignity of her presence to the party, Christmas was the homiest of the home festivals. The whole season was a simple preparation for the only really passionately anticipated event of the year — New Year's Day. On Christmas there were family gatherings, with long dinners of prairie chicken and whatever frivolities the clever housewife could concoct, with no fresh fruit, no nuts, no out-of-season vegetables, and no skilled French cooks. The 'hired girl' was a blessing (or the curse) of only the few wealthy homes. The caterer had never been heard of, and when he finally did make his appearance fifty or sixty years ago he supplied nothing except ice-cream. In the wealthiest households a fiddler might be had

in, but not guests outside the family. Usually some member of the family had enough talent to play the simple music which the dances required. And such dances! Square, sedate, but hilariously thrilling to grandmother as well as granddaughter.

There would be no extravagantly glittering Christmas trees. Very few families except the Germans had a tree at all. Boughs of evergreen were tacked over the doors and the windows, gathered from the great woods north and west of the city, the woods which are now a part of the most populous miles in Chicago.

If the family happened to live on the north shore of the river and was bid to a family Christmas on the south shore, it dragged itself, of necessity, across the Chicago River on a hand ferry at Rush Street, or crossed at Dearborn Street on a bridge operated by hand cables. And whether the

party were joyously gay or not, as moral upright villagers they must needs be at home and in bed by ten o'clock, or, if distance and utter levity demanded, they might possibly sneak in at midnight.

While the tree is still on the lake front, it will watch the mobs rushing into the city on New Year's Eve for the bacchanal which has come to be the American custom of welcoming in the New Year. In the old days, every one was so excited about New Year's Day that they hadn't time to waste on its eve. In the rare households where the ladies of the family were not receiving, a basket was hung on the doorknob in which the callers left their cards. Otherwise, the ladies, furbelowed in their most extravagant gowns, 'received' and kept an accurate account of the number and names of the gentlemen who honored them. The days after New Year's were spent in com-

paring notes and — for the beaux — in recovering from hot toddy and fried oysters and chicken salad, which the fair hostesses had probably spent half the night before preparing.

The nearest approach to the casual, large, group parties, which the Christmas holidays see nowadays, was, in those days, the Firemen's Ball. Every one who was any one belonged to the fire brigade. The young blades of the village rivaled one another in their devotion to it. A fire was a social event of the first water. The town was very wooden, and fires were frequent and thorough. Whenever one started, the entire town dropped everything and rushed to see the fun. The men dressed themselves up in their *opéra-bouffe* outfits and pumped water — until Long John Wentworth gave them an engine that didn't need hand pumping — and the ladies arrived as soon afterwards



as possible with sandwiches and pots of coffee. One met every one at a fire.

It was meet that the Firemen's Ball should be the civic social event of the year. It happened in January. The one in 1847 was a triumph long remembered. There were ten hundred and fifty invitations, all written and delivered by hand (no engravers or post for the meticulous hostesses of those days). It was held in the firehouse and the *élite* of the city attended.

For the Christmas festivities nowadays the long, luxurious trains which roll into Chicago from the East bring many guests who stay a day and dash on to another city in equally luxurious trains. They don't realize it, but the city which they are visiting so casually is the railroad center of the United States. Mankind surges through its land gates as it surges through one of the great ports of the world. But things were

far different in the early days. Any one who wanted to be in the village of Chicago for Christmas couldn't decide on December 24th at two o'clock in the afternoon and arrive on Christmas morning from the East. Weeks were spent in the journey. Covered wagons served for the ordinary travelers, but the *élite* came by boat. For a week, if the winds were fair, they were uncomfortable and crowded and badly fed and sick while the boat hurried toward Chicago from Buffalo. And the days they had spent — or weeks — to get to Buffalo! It was never considered much of a trip. They finally arrived and found a town which well deserved its name of 'garden city,' and their enthusiasm for its quiet and comfort after the long hard trip must have had much to do with the increasing numbers which year after year made the arduous trip.

The Christmas feast was not planned the

day before Christmas, either. Days of hunting the fowl which were its backbone preceded the work of the housewife. The father and the boys did the shopping for her with guns. There were no great slaughter-houses to supply her with dressed fowl. The packing industry wasn't even heard of. For many years now Chicago has been known as the 'pork-packing town.' Every visitor who comes from overseas insists upon being shown through the 'Yards.' English poets have celebrated Chicago for its stock-yards odor, and missed the fresh spiritual fragrance of youth and a zest for life that simply exudes from the city through its smoke and its dirt and its city smells. But in the early days pigs were just pigs, and not a world advertisement. They were a nuisance, not even a luxury. The village had to pass an ordinance that 'any pig or hog running at large without a ring in its

nose shall be fined \$2.00 collected on conviction of such offense before a justice of peace.' Pigs running around loose in the suavities of Michigan Avenue — isn't that enough to give the giant tree an extra glimmer of mirth and of pride at what the years have done?

In the darkness of the nights between Christmas and New Year's — nights which are now hectic with sirens of motors and the scrape of shifting gears and the continual swish of human voices and the blare of lights — within the memory of men and women living, the quietness of a town safely shut in by its own fireside was in the air, with the occasional call of the town crier — 'Lost! Lost! Lost! Little girl seven years old!'

Chicago has left those days behind it, but memories of them make sweeter the complete security and comfort of the city in

these days. And the dazzling pyramid of jeweled green, a giant's dream of a Christmas tree, is a symbol of the child's fairy-tale come true. It is a Christmas *boutonnière* tucked into the proud buttonhole of Chicago.

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